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Former CIA agent has doubts about actions against Nicaragua

By Curt Fields
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Ralph McGehee, a 25-year veteran of the CIA, saw politics play havoc with the truth in Vietnam. He is worried that he is seeing it again in Nicaragua.

McGehee, who worked as a case officer in paramilitary, covert and intelligence operations from 1962 to 1977, says he is the much-trumpeted invasion of Nicaraguan troops into Honduras on March 23-25 as an example of the same sort of CIA distortion, McGehee said - distortion of the type that he saw first-hand.

McGehee believes that the invasion was really just a routine border skirmish with Nicaraguan soldiers chasing contras across the Honduran border, as they have done several times in the past. It was blown out of proportion, McGehee said, because such news would help the president's chances of winning congressional approval of \$100 million in aid to the contras.

The situation is extremely similar to CIA activities in Southeast Asia, said McGehee, who spoke in Tallahassee on Tuesday as part of Central American Information Week activities.

In an interview before McGehee spoke Tuesday night at Florida State University, he pointed to a 1965 incident in Vietnam when it was decided that the United States would have to commit large numbers of troops.

The story that had been told for years was that there had been an invasion by the North Vietnamese into South Vietnam, McGehee said. The only problem was that there weren't any North Vietnamese in South Vietnam, he said. So, since it was difficult to justify sending troops to turn back an invasion if there was none, the CIA faked one, he said.

The CIA loaded a Vietnamese boat with communist-made weapons and demolition charges, floated it onto the coast and then shot it to make it appear as if a firefight had taken place, he said. Then, he said, the media was brought in to see the "evidence" of the North Vietnamese incursion.

A short time later, McGehee

said, an official "white paper" about the North invading the South was written to justify sending troops into the area. The primary proof of an ongoing invasion cited in the paper was the CIA-planted ship, he said. A week after the paper appeared, the escalation of U.S. involvement was under way.

"The CIA is not now nor has it ever been a central intelligence agency,"

McGehee said. "It is the covert-action arm of the president's foreign policy. Misinformation is one of

its primary activities and the American people are the prime target."

Activities such as loading a truck with communist-made weapons conveniently wrapped in Nicaraguan newspapers and then sending it across Honduras to be intercepted when it breaks down with a flat is standard procedure for the CIA, McGehee said. So is painting wall murals in French "welcoming" the U.S. troops following the invasion of that country, he said.

"It's a standard technique used universally since (the agency's) inception," he said.

McGehee did not come quickly to his position that the CIA's actions are not what they should be. A Notre Dame football player in the late '40s, McGehee joined the CIA as an ardent anti-communist. He said it was about his 19th year with the agency when he began to question what was being done. After another year or two, he said, he became completely disillusioned.

"I was a Cold Warrior, but while I was in Vietnam I did a 180 (degree) turnaround," McGehee said. "What I find most pernicious is that (the agency) is using its intelligence to deceive the government worker in decision-making positions."

He said he attempted to fight

the system from within, but was continually rebuffed. So, after toughing it out for a couple of more years because of retirement requirements, he resigned in 1977 and was awarded the Career Intelligence Medal.

Since leaving the CIA, he wrote "Deadly Deceits," a book about his gradual realization of what the CIA was actually engaged in. After three years of research, he submitted the book to the CIA for pre-publication review as the agency requires of all employees and former employees.

The agency had 397 areas, some running several pages in length, that it wanted to delete, he said. He then had to prove that none of the information he had compiled was classified, that it was all part of public record. After three lawsuits - which became moot after a court ruling on the case of another former CIA employee - and two years, the book was approved and published.

Although he said he doesn't feel endangered, he said the CIA does occasionally let him know it hasn't forgotten him.

"My phone is tapped. It's done in a way so that I'll know it's tapped for intimidation purposes," he said. "My garbage sometimes gets picked up before the garbage collectors can get to it. I'm under surveillance from time to time. People have sat in front of my house watching it."

"Sometimes I think about the idea of just lying on the beach or relaxing in a row boat and reading (or) quits. There is a burnout factor. But, I've four children and five grandchildren and I worry about the ultimate cataclysm. That may seem a little grandiose, but I guess if you boil it down, that's why I do it."